

Robert Mapplethorpe

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Press Release

Xavier Hufkens is delighted to announce a new exhibition dedicated to the work of the American photographer Robert Mapplethorpe (1946–1989). Comprising some forty prints, the presentation spans every stage of the artist's working life and includes representative examples of the defining themes within his oeuvre, most notably portraits, self-portraits, flowers, figure studies and bondage tableaux.

Mapplethorpe's career was as glittering as it was controversial. Feted and vilified in equal measure, he ran a hugely successful commercial studio while also producing some of the most contentious and hotly-debated photographs of the twentieth-century. Although his unflinching depictions of homosexuality, S&M and bondage provoked a fierce moral backlash at the time (gay sex was not legalised in NY until 1980), these are now amongst his most legendary and sought-after works.

The prints in this exhibition encapsulate the multiple facets of Mapplethorpe's practice. Provocative images, such as *Clothespinned Mouth* (1978), date from the period in which the photographer became increasingly interested in the New York S&M scene. In pictures such as these, a tension arises between the confrontational subject matter and Mapplethorpe's undisputed mastery of the photographic medium. Of these images, he said: 'I don't like that particular word "shocking". I'm looking for the unexpected. I'm looking for things I've never seen before. . . I was in a position to take those pictures. I felt an obligation to do them.' Together with the portraits of celebrities (Arnold Schwarzenegger, Kathleen Turner) and those of the artist's friends and lovers (Patti Smith, Sam Wagstaff), Mapplethorpe documented the world around him in all its dazzling brilliance and extremes. *Bacchus* (1988), on the other hand, dates from the latter years of Mapplethorpe's career when his focus shifted towards male and female nudes, classical sculpture and still-life compositions. Balance, unity and radiant light, as well as a subtle eroticism, become ever more emphatic in these works.

One can also examine the prints from a technical perspective. In so doing, a link can be made between even the most antithetical images. The leitmotiv is Mapplethorpe's obsessive quest for perfection of form, his focus on the sculptural (be it the curve of the human body or the analogous line of a petal) and a consistent visual style that is instantly recognisable: simple forms set against neutral backgrounds, a razor-sharp focus and opulent, tonal gradations ranging from inky, velvety black to luminous silver-white. Working almost exclusively in his studio—nothing was ever left to chance—Mapplethorpe was a proponent of a formal classicism that had been all but forgotten during his lifetime. He was also an aesthete: a photographer who divined the beauty in every subject—even the darkest—and sought to make it visible.

Roland Barthes' landmark text on photography, *Camera Lucida* (1980), offers yet another prism through which to approach the material. The French philosopher instantly gauged the measure of Mapplethorpe's genius. In his description of a self-portrait, (written some thirty-seven years ago), he formulated an observation that might equally be applied to the entire oeuvre: 'the photographer has caught the boy's hand. . . at just the right degree of openness, the right density of abandonment: a few millimetres more or less

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and the divined body would no longer have been offered with benevolence... the photographer has found the *right moment*, the *Kairos* of desire.' And it is precisely this—Mapplethorpe's unfailing ability to pinpoint the 'perfect moment' (*Kairos*)—that shines forth from every print.

Xavier Hufkens represents the Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation, NY, from whose archive the works in this exhibition have been selected.

Robert Mapplethorpe (b. New York, USA, 1946; d. Boston, USA, 1989) mounted over fifty solo exhibitions during his lifetime, including numerous museum shows in the USA, Europe and Japan. Since his death, his work has continued to be exhibited and acquired by major international art institutions. Robert Mapplethorpe is currently the subject of a major touring retrospective *The Perfect Medium*, which opened at the J. Paul Getty Museum and Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), Los Angeles in 2016, has recently toured to Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, Canada and will next be shown at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia (October 2017–February 2018). His work can also currently be seen in *Robert Mapplethorpe, a perfectionist*, Kunsthal Rotterdam, Rotterdam (on view until 27 August 2017). Other recent exhibitions include: *On the Edge*, ARoS Aarhus Kunstmuseum, Aarhus, Denmark (2016); *Mapplethorpe + Munch*, The Munch Museum, Oslo (2016). Mapplethorpe is also the subject of a recently released, Emmy-nominated, HBO documentary *Look at the Pictures* (2016).

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